

Postcolonialism in the Poetry of Mary Dorcey

Rose Atfield
Brunel University

In Irish cultural and political convention, the representational space of femininity has been colonised; it has been subjected to restricted and marginalised interpretation and representation. In diagnosing the relevance of postcolonial readings to the work of Mary Dorcey, this essay will outline how her work is a collective process of recognition and exposure of a colonialism that denies and represses identity, and also how she achieves the restoration and reconstruction of female identity in political, sexual and literary contexts. A feminist and queer-theoretical approach is married to a postcolonial methodology in this essay, as it is important to redress the lack noted by Linda Connolly, wherein “despite its self-styled status as the custodian of ‘Irish Studies,’ postcolonial theory has been applied in a limited mode” (155).

Colonialism can generally be defined as the systematic establishment of ruling power systems by external political-cultural authority; as Eavan Boland remarked, “power has just as much to do with a poetic sphere of operation as any other . . . power has operated in the making of canons, the making of taste, the nominating of what poems should represent the age and so on” (Means Wright and Hannan 10). It is, therefore, essential to recognise that when considering postcolonialism in Irish literature, it is not only the historical national colonialism of Ireland by England which is challenged but the “internal” colonialism created by the patriarchal construct of the Irish social and literary establishment. Ailbhe Smyth drew attention to this in her cogent introduction to a significant collection of Irish women’s writing, challenging:

[T]he patriarchs who have appropriated unto themselves exclusive rights of public utterance. Let the sceptics count our voices in the courts, the legislature, the church, the multi-national corporations. And let them also count the anthologies in which women’s writings are represented. It will be quickly done.
(9)

Ann Owens Weekes commented that “arguably the social struggle may ultimately effect more positive change in Ireland than the political, economic, and military struggle in the north . . . the social struggle was, and is, primarily a struggle for women’s rights” (Kirkpatrick 124).

Mary Dorcey has endorsed this postcolonial development. She states: “When I was growing up the attitude always was, ‘If you want change, go abroad, don’t criticise the way we do things at home.’ This

is changing and the change is growing very quickly since the women's movement in the seventies" (O'Carroll and Collins 25). She has, however, emphasised a sense of lack of self-definition, as an adult, concluding that "one thing that living abroad does to a lot of us, I think, is that it makes us feel, when we return, forevermore a visitor in our own country . . . those of us who travel and grow a little different are made to feel on our return not quite truly Irish" (O'Carroll and Collins 25). This is evidenced in her poem "Coming Home," in which the physicality of the smaller scale of Ireland, compared with America, is conceived as threatening:

the streets seem more narrow than ever.
The crowds terrifying in their intimacy . . .
(*Kindling* 8)

Later in the poem another potent image of the "social struggle" is conveyed in the reference to a bookshop, where:

. . . i find a small women's section . . .
giving proof of the sustained struggle
of some irish women against
the vicious bigotry of all the pope's boys
on this island, their Maginot line. (9-10)

It is surely not incidental that Dorcey chose to use a lower case "i" for the personal pronoun and the more general "irish women" implying the lack of acknowledgement of women's lives and relationships. The "pope's boys" is similarly diminished but "vicious bigotry" implies the domination of the gendered colonisation Dorcey suffered in the 1950s and '60s, which she describes in the following terms: "Fear and suspicion surrounding anything to do with the body or the personal life. The near total repression of ideas and information. A Catholic state for a Catholic people" (O'Carroll and Collins 42). To counteract this colonial attitude of exclusion, Dorcey takes a postcolonial stance and makes a "deliberate choice to stay and work in Ireland [because] . . . As we all know most Irish people get pushed out of Ireland not only because they can't find work, but because of social pressure to conform to a narrow norm" (O'Carroll and Collins 30). Ann Owens Weekes emphasised, "The ideal woman was domestic, a guardian of morality and traditional order" (Kirkpatrick 125). In "Deliberately Personal," Dorcey exposes the dangerously repressive constraints imposed by the traditionally conceived identity of woman as carer and submissive partner:

Who is the woman
who drove the children to school
made the beds and washed the dishes—
before slitting her throat at the bathroom mirror?
(*Moving Into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* 12)

The shock of the violent, self-destructive action is enhanced by the contrasting banality of the routine activities; the movement of the poem is disrupted by the dramatic gap in the rhetorical question,

reflecting the “traditional order” disrupted by the desperate plea for recognition of this anonymous individual. Dorcey highlights the plight of many women who spend their whole lives working for others without any acknowledgement of their own needs, subsuming their identities in those of their families. The challenging tone and fragmented structure of the poem implies wider social obligations to such individuals in a postcolonial context:

And who are you
come to that?
All of you
out there . . .
asking me
why I have to be—
so raw
and deliberately
personal? (12)

In “Uncharted Passage” Dorcey explores the situation of a mother who has Alzheimer’s disease and is losing her identity through this disability. The title itself clearly suggests a journey, also a “rite of passage.” The oxymoron immediately implies conflict—both political and personal. This is extended in the choice of diction, the harsher, more concrete images of “flagship,” “masthead,” “cargo” and “bulwark” are in tension with the fluidity of sound and association in “shallows,” “helpless,” “silks,” “float,” “self” and “still” (*Like Joy in Season 3*). The hinge of the poem is the potent image of “the flotsam/of memory,” the enjambment emphasises the difficulty of holding on to the past, the need to retain the essence of the mother who is irretrievably losing identity and in doing so depriving her children of her “self” in them. The yearning tone of the repetition of “so long . . .” admits the selfish element of wanting the mother figure to “endure”: if she “survives,” her offspring “remain children,” secure and uninhibited by adult responsibilities and expectations.

Dorcey’s skilfully understated ambiguity also implies the converse, a denial of the children’s true “selves,” the inability to finally detach and move out into their own identities; taking on the challenges of adulthood. Her feminist, postcolonial perspective adopts, deploys and ultimately asserts ownership of initially patriarchal constructs: a variety of meanings conflates Empson’s seven types of ambiguity with Derrida’s concept of language independent of individuals—the poem, independent of its author, goes out on the sea, resisting the rule of law by taking an “uncharted passage”; the conventional patriarchal logic of argument is disturbed.

Another literary convention, in the Irish tradition, the concept of “Mother Ireland” is subverted in the shifting points of view conveyed through the skilful blend of second and third persons’ perspective throughout the poem “Uncharted Passage”: “You are . . . we travel . . . ; you founder . . . we stand-to . . . ; you endure/we are young . . . you hoard . . . We remain . . .” (3-4). The interdependence implies an uncertain, daunting future for the state, should it lose sight of its “self”; the continuous, insistent sibilance echoes both the sound of the waves

and the sense of determined resilience, “clinging on.” Both the poet’s personal struggle for independence and the launching of the poem into the waters of critical debate, also reflect the more universal ambivalence surrounding devolvement of the “nation state,” the “flagship” and the greater acceptance of women’s voices.

The jagged, staccato rhythm of Dorcey’s “The Rapture of Senses,” created by the five short lines in each stanza, emphasises the duality of the circumstances described—within the overall, superficial reading of a poem about “love,” there is the struggle not only within a particular relationship but also in the context of Irish society, particularly emphasised in “Speaking out/when it’s dangerous” . . . “being alike/And being various” (*Like Joy in Season, Like Sorrow* 49). The poem metaphorically conveys the concern Dorcey expressed in an interview, where she suggests that “women’s position in society as a subservient class, existing to service the needs of men and children, means that the mass of women cannot hope to establish a self-determined sexuality within the existing patriarchal power system” (O’Carroll and Collins 30).

In contrast, in the first part of the poem “Time has made a Mirror,” the soft, meditative quality of the consonance, “Sometimes . . . my . . . made them . . . mirror . . . seems . . . resemble” (*Like Joy in Season, Like Sorrow* 71) suggests the comfort and security of the hands of the mother and/ or former lover, which the speaker’s have “grown/ To resemble.” The only specific in the poem is “The wide bands/ of silver” (71), possibly bequeathed by the mother, or left or presented by the lover. The image of circularity and harmony the “bands” suggest has a universal quality. The later use of the phrase “pieces/ Of silver” implies betrayal, employing a very traditional, biblical image yet undercutting this by suggesting that the speaker is reflected in their shine; they form the mirror which also reflects “your strength?/ Your suffering?” (71). Caitriona Clutterbuck argues that “because political geography and gender interconnect so extensively in Irish culture, it is important to find out how each operate as constructs, and this is best done by examining their parallel as well as their intersecting relationships” (Kirkpatrick 124). As in many of her other poems, the parallel construct of the state is implied in Dorcey’s description of the individual relationship, which mirrors the “strength” and “suffering” of those who have struggled through the ages for recognition and acceptance in Irish society.

Dorcey recognises and exposes colonialism in the context of sexuality and presents a postcolonial stance in response, robustly stating: “Lifelong brainwashing from the cradle to the grave to remain faithful to heterosexuality is still not sufficient to keep everyone suppressed. The entire force of Church and State, the entire weight of international culture, is not enough to suppress the strength of nature. The instinct to joy and love and intimacy is irrepressible” (O’Carroll and Collins 43). Again, Owens Weekes has reflected upon this issue; she contends: “Lesbians were not criminalized under the British legal codes that the Free State adopted. Lack of criminalization was not a sign of acceptance, of course, but a negation of women’s agency,

which continued in the laws of Irish Free State and Republic, effectively restricting women's behaviour and desire" (Kirkpatrick 124-5).

In "Coming Home," the idea of challenging others' expectations and moral attitudes is enhanced in the image of embarrassment, emphasised by the positioning and enjambment used in the typography of the poem: "to cross/ now the paths of Stephen's Green,/ feels like walking naked/ through a relative's cocktail party" (*Kindling* 8). The images of containment, in which any acknowledgement of transgression of conventional sexual identity are placed, such as "Shop fronts" belie any real sense of liberal acceptance; the repressive attitude of most shoppers is suggested in the rhyme of "display. . . risque" and terms such as "shocked . . . flaunted" (8). The sanitisation of "a discreet lesbian touch/ At last fit for bourgeois seduction" (8) shows Dorcey's satirical awareness of an insufficient nod to difference. Dorcey has said, "There is a growing secular and liberal constituency in Irish society, especially among those under forty. I feel there is a real hunger in this group for an imaginative extension of this world and for images and creative work that acknowledge the reality of the world we live in" (O'Carroll and Collins 33). This reality was confirmed in law, as "1993 saw the passing of homosexual legislation more liberal than that in several European countries" (Kirkpatrick 125), and is joyously expressed in her poetry, challenging conventional expectations of sexual identities; going beyond the bounds set by "other people's decencies" referred to in Dorcey's poem, "Come Quietly or the Neighbours will Hear."

However, Dorcey still perceives "The heterosexual establishment is afraid of the power of lesbianism, because it is a radical threat to the system as we know it. It demands the empowerment of women, the autonomy of women, the freedom of women to define themselves" (O'Carroll and Collins 43). Owens Weekes confirms, "The threat lay in the homosexual's difference and perceived non-productivity in a society dependent on the unpaid labour of women in families" (Kirkpatrick 141). Equally, colonialism of this type, expressed through exclusion, can be encouraged by heterosexual women who also find lesbianism threatening, or lesbian women who adopt patriarchal expression, "speak with their voices" as expressed in the poem aptly titled "Colonised Minds":

Oh wasn't it all so easy
Back in those innocent days?
When we thought only men
Were the enemy and not
—The women they've made.
(*Kindling* 20)

Dorcey's poems which depict towns, buildings and rooms, set in wards, suburban houses, station platforms, "small minds and towns/ rented rooms and narrow beds,/ walled in" (*Kindling* 13), tend to reflect a sense of constriction and frustration. The poem "In a Dublin Nursing Home" contrasts the openness of the poet's own lesbian

relationship: “our hands embracing on the white sheet,” with “Husbands” who “come and go, devotion comfortably/ contained within the appropriate visiting hours” (13). Barriers created to shield others from the truth of a relationship seen as transgressive, are a “tactful barricade of earphone and raised/newspaper” (13). Finally the tension is broken as the poet challenges such covert disapproval:

Strained beyond embarrassment or caution
When i took your face between my hands
And kissed your mouth a slow good bye (14).

Recalling earlier, more difficult experiences of colonial exclusion, when Dorsey was first involved in the *Irish Women’s Rights Movement*, she “attained a measure of fame and was invited to speak at several events, one of which *The Irish Times* reported, revealing Dorsey’s name. This was 1972, and [she] was vilified in the media, her family humiliated, and her actions condemned publicly by her own parish priest” (Kirkpatrick 141). Such memories inspired poems like “Mirrors,” in which the mother figure is looking out beyond the confines of her traditional family home; “Windows to the world, through which you/ Glimpse a life and loves not spoken of/ In well curtained drawing rooms” (Dorsey, *Kindling* 25). The lesbian partners are treading the line, not being over-explicit in their connection, within the restrictions of a conventional middle-class setting: “Walk from you with my woman lover/Down the smooth flower lined path” (25).

In “Return,” the repressive attitudes of other travellers are emphasised as the poet conveys a sense of resentment at being forced to be over-conscious of her relationship, which belies the confident expression of indifference:

On the narrow platform, our hips
Will draw close, we will not mind
How they stare—the aggrieved faces
Such a fuss—
For a woman!
(*Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* 18)

A similar resentful self-consciousness is expressed in “Come Quietly or the Neighbours will Hear”:

Have you ever made love
With the t.v. on
—to spare the neighbours...

the embarrassment;
the joy undisguised
of two people;
especially women
(imagine the uproar!)
coming together?
(*Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* 36)

In a post-national Ireland the new political paradigm will hopefully recognise difference in more liberal terms; the conventional, patriarchal, heterosexual strictures in society might give way to fuller

expression of personal freedom to acknowledge and celebrate sexual diversity, as Dorcey's poetry clearly does. Ideally, "the state can operate *within* cultural paradigms and ideological sites of contestation to develop a consensual stability" (Ryan 9). Nevertheless, in the poetry, the intimate gestures are frequently presented as out of place, demonstrated typographically through the continual enjambment pushing through the boundaries of conventional verse structure, reflecting "the very complex attachment to the mother so often found in lesbian writing" (Yorke, *British Lesbian Poetics* 81).

In the poem "Daughter," Dorcey addresses the "daughter/ who I will not know", to whom she will leave "this whole wide world/ that was not yet/ wide enough for me/ to bear you into" (*Moving into the Space Cleared by Our Mothers* 23). The colonisation of "women's place" has narrowed the boundaries of acceptance for children of lesbian partnerships, denying her the chance of her own relationship with a daughter. At the end of "Uncharted Passage," the enjambment and separation of the final word on a line of its own suggest she clings to the connection with her own mother and universalises this need, projecting it beyond herself, beyond her siblings; "All of us—/ somebody's children/ still" (*Like Joy in Season, Like Sorrow* 4). This universalization, however, can also reflect the lack of personalisation in the specific mother/daughter relationship, as suggested in the reference to "anybody's mother" in "Each day our First Night." In this poem, a visit to her mother in the former family home is chillingly depicted through the simple diction chosen, the harsh sounds of which render the everyday actions haunting:

Now I climb the steps
To a cold house

And call out a word
That used to summon her.
An old woman
comes to the door.
(*Like Joy in Season, Like Sorrow* 5)

The depersonalisation is effectively presented as cumulative, through the short, three-lined verses and the continuous enjambment:

Each day
A little more
Is lost of her.
Captured for an instant
Then gone.
Everything that

Made her particular (6)

By taking the stereotypical "love is" concept of the 1970s, and reworking it for the twenty-first century, Dorcey creates a sonorous repetition which is a feature of many poems, such as "The Rapture of Senses": "it is impetuous . . . It is thinking . . . It is cooking" (*Like Joy in Season, Like Sorrow* 49-50). This develops a catalogue, which is in turn a chant or mantra to resist oppression and disapproval,

“forgetting// Offence, / forgoing dignity.” The memory of insult and rejection is itself rejected; loss of dignity in the perspective of wider society is negligible in contrast with the security and permanence of the memory of love that is celebrated at the conclusion of the poem. Thus Dorsey confirms Owens Weekes’ remark: “The euphoria of the 1970s becomes literature of love, as Dorsey transforms the secret joys into a medium for all to enjoy” (Kirkpatrick 148).

The intimate, yet conversely undefined space of the relationship is explored with further ambiguity, in lines which could imply either complete, unspoken interconnection of individuals, even when not physically together: “thinking/ the same thought/ in different places,” or mentally and eventually emotionally detached: “in the one place . . . contrary directions” (50). Again, this can be read in a more extended context, and from a postcolonial perspective, suggesting unspoken support and encouragement for a more open and liberal understanding of sexualities, yet little direct respect for unorthodox relationships from the heterosexual majority who previously attempted to colonise, or rigidly control, sexuality in the state.

The last two verses fervently challenge the fleeting, capricious nature of the emotion, suggesting a wealth of sensuous pleasure which will remain a treasured memory and part of the participant despite the possibility of later break ups and difficulties. The place of memory acknowledges the value of the moment and the lyrical quality of the language, with its rich assonance, both gives itself up to the delight of sensuality and conversely implies a lack of critical perspective in once again employing clichés and at the same time denying their banality: “love / enough— / my love,/ for one lifetime” (50).

“Time has made a Mirror” dramatises loss of mother and lover at once—the physicality of memory is emphasised and the place, which is now empty of those loved, is reflected and distorted in the “mirror” of the hands. This uncomfortable disassociation can be linked to the reversal of the “mirror stage” of Lacanian thought—the establishment of the self and other is, in this situation, a terrible awareness of loss and consequent instability. The simplicity of language is again crucial to the universalization of the emotion and circumstance described: “Wanting/ to see you again” (*Like Joy in Season, Like Sorrow* 71) could refer to anyone at any time in any place. The yearning tone of the single word isolated on one line is enhanced by the enjambment: “I . . . you . . . my . . . yours” (71), repeated throughout the poem, which reflects the loss of self through the absence of the other. Dorsey argues: “While it is possible . . . to express physical attraction to one’s own sex without adopting a radical political philosophy, it is impossible to make this a reality for anything more than a few if we do not create a feminist revolution” (O’Carroll and Collins 29-30).

As a writer, she is respecting her own vow to ensure that no young woman will grow up in Ireland as she did, “totally ignorant of the existence of earlier generations of lesbians” (O’Carroll and Collins 44). The questions posed in the last lines, of “Time has made a Mirror”: “your strength?/ Your suffering?” (71) challenges the concept that only one in the daughter/mother/lover relationships suffered—the

ambiguity implies suffering might refer to the mother's distress in the stages of Alzheimer's disease, but also the lover's pain at the end of the relationship. Similarly, the question of strength could be either the mother's persistence and resilience, or the lover's force of personality needed to walk away, to reject the past. Dorcey has contributed significantly to the developing perspective celebrated by David Alderson and Linda Anderson, when they suggest: "as a reappropriation of a term of abuse, 'queer' has been used to valorise those forms of sexuality which are not merely resistant to the 'norm' but which carry the potential to subvert the very grounds on which such normative judgements might be made in the first place by refusing or rendering incoherent homo/heterosexual and—often at the same time—masculine/feminine binarisms" (2). Dorcey's typical ambivalence teases out possibilities and also suggests the speaker's own suffering and strength to endure, to turn the experiences into poetry, whilst simultaneously universalising the emotions and recasting them in terms of personal and public, individual and national experience.

Another kind of colonialism exposed through her poetry is that of the power differentials of the literary and cultural establishment in Ireland and the consequent denial of the female voice. Dorcey explores and exposes relationships between mother, daughter and lover in the "Queer Place" of post-colonial Ireland. The state/ church patriarchy of persecution, which Dorcey has openly resisted as a lesbian writer and academic, is addressed in her poetry through the subversion of structured verses. From these, her words move out into more fluid forms, expressing her ideas and feelings, which clearly reflect this resistance. As Jane Dowson has commented, "in their disruptions of traditional metres and displacements of conventional symbols, women can subvert and appropriate the tradition" (16). In Dorcey's case, this is the dual tradition of literary and poetic form and that of patriarchal dominance in state and artistic spheres.

A further dimension of the postcolonial response is Dorcey's subject matter, her concern for the intimate and domestic, which she universalises in the ambiguities and deceptively simple, multi-layered language of her work. This mirrors Eavan Boland's postcolonial stance, asserted when she gave the Poetry Book Society Lecture in 1994: "I had a subversive relation to what was nominated . . . as being a proper subject for poetry . . . a recent tradition of poetry . . . made certain stern prescriptions about what was suitable subject matter for a poem . . . a false authority was conferred on a poet and a false importance was required of the subject matter for a poem" (Boland 33). She suggests that the patriarchal Irish literary establishment had colonised poetic expression, excluding and marginalising women's contribution; this needs to be addressed in postcolonial terms, otherwise as Linda Connolly confirms, "Irish postcolonial theory has become as exclusive and gendered in composition as the canonical historical paradigm it sought to refute" (148).

In a key anthology of contemporary Irish women's writing, Ailbhe Smyth reflects:

As women, we have been denied the right to speak . . . As Irish, our language has been devalued and marginalized by the colonisers from a culture, which has always sought by various means to appropriate Ireland and the Irish. As Irish women, we are thus doubly damned, doubly silenced. (9)

Dorcey has confirmed this comment, implying that Irish women are thus doubly colonised, recalling that as she grew up, “women writers, so far as I knew, if Irish, were rich, Protestant, upper class and living in exile. It was considered that Irish Catholic women were incapable of any other vocation other than the care of men and children . . . 80 per cent of the books I read were by men” (O’Carroll and Collins 38-39). This marginalisation emphasises the dual colonisation, still evident nearly ten years later in literary establishments and academic and publishing institutions. However, Liz Yorke has commented, “In daring to speak freely, impudently, even presumptuously about their bodies, their sexuality and their relationship to cultural forms, women poets are seriously calling into question the conventional logic of patriarchal discourses” (*Impertinent Voices* 4).

In “Heaven’s Breath Held,” Dorcey exemplifies this challenge in women’s poetry as she employs a free verse form with continuous enjambment, delighting in the expression of “so many/ things/ I haven’t said/ about love/ or trying to love” (*Like Joy in Season, Like Sorrow* 56) The images and instances depicted could relate to any permutation of human relationship. The imagery of a dangerous place, “perilous/ country,” faced by an unconventional woman writer, subversively “question[ing] the conventional logic . . .” (Yorke *Impertinent Voices* 4) of “charted paths . . . affections// more orderly” (*Like Joy in Season, Like Sorrow* 58), emphasises the particular difficulty of a lesbian writer “making the freedom to write openly” (O’Carroll and Collins 43).

Dorcey expresses “the multifaceted reality of women’s lives—the fusion of emotional, sensual and intellectual experience that women take for granted . . . I wanted to find a way of writing that would not only express this way of life but embody it . . . Pluralism is a daily necessity for us, a gift and an imperative” (O’Carroll and Collins 43). In her poetry, Dorcey achieves this by exploring the different roles women play in the public and private world; in response to neighbours, mothers, lovers. This is especially apparent in her collection of poetry, *Like Joy in Season, Like Sorrow*, in which she combines the roles of daughter and lover and recreates the harrowing loss of the mother she knew, due to irrevocable senile dementia.

This complex relationship is conveyed through images of acting and theatre; the progression through “Each Day Our First Night” moves between past and present, “questioning conventional logic,” and into an indeterminate time, in which “each day [is] our first night” (5) and contrasts the former reality of the relationship with an act, a performance without any underlying substance left, the gestures empty of real meaning:

She stands patiently
To wave me off—

Remembering
The stage directions,
Of lifted hand

and longing gaze. (7)

Like the “uncharted passage,” this is a previously unknown experience, an “experimental piece . . . she plays her part . . . a last bow” (7), until the irony of the final lines, suggesting *carpe diem*, that all our lives we are busy dying: “You could swear she/ Was born for it!” (7). “Learning by Heart” makes potent use of similar theatrical imagery, this time more specifically directed towards the part played by a lover but skilfully expressed in achingly direct terms, which could refer to either relationship: “What am I to do/ With my loss of you?” (77). The answer the speaker offers herself is to reconstruct “each part played . . . The costumes you wore . . . your gestures” (77) and the poem also ends with a theatrical closure: rather than the “final bow” of “Each day our First Night,” it is “one last curtain call” during which the speaker, “like a good understudy . . . can learn you by heart” (78).

In “Going Home Without You,” the frustration of losing the person her mother once was and the self she was in relation to her, is also presented in theatrical terms:

The worst of it all
Is to know that you
Are in there, still—
Exactly as always—
Under this mask . . . (10)

The dramatic imagery emphasises yet again the breaking down of divisions between actuality and artificiality, “playing a game . . . this charade . . . this carnival trick . . . playing disguises . . . this pantomime face” (10).

In these tender, intimate poems, with their combined tones of exasperation and longing, and mixture of literary and domestic vocabulary, Dorsey conveys a positive postcolonial perspective as suggested in Liz Yorke’s comment, “Women writers and poets are creating fictional work—stories, myths, tales—that are rooted in the historical body, in the materiality of women’s existence in real life. In doing so, they are giving voice to a largely un-listened-to dimension of experience, one that has been denied validity and legitimation in a culture still very much dominated by men” (*Impertinent Voices* 4). The poet’s task, Dorsey implies, is to universalise these experiences, to render them manageable for herself and others and to evoke compassion for those in such deteriorating circumstances, whatever their sexual identity, reflecting on our common humanity.

In “Grist to the Mill,” she resolves “To take your laughter/ Your bafflement, the/ Sudden shafts of vision/ Your dark ironies/ And shape them/ Into an artefact” (9). Of course this is exactly what she has done in poetic form: once again the poem is initially depicting the circumstances of the speaker’s mother’s degeneration but could easily be applied to the breakdown of a relationship with a sexual partner and

the consequent resilience required, to force the artist in the self to fashion the experience into something which can be distanced and coped with. It is in this way that Dorcey realises those hopes expressed initially, of “an imaginative extension of this world” and “images and creative work that acknowledge the reality of the world we live in” (O’Carroll and Collins 43).

It is impossible to ignore the hinterland of poetic convention and tradition in “Uncharted Passage.” Dorcey subverts the patriarchal labelling of ships with female names, which asserts masculine ownership, with the embodiment of maternal bonding. This natural, organic relationship with its psychological inevitability, “gladly or not/ we travel in your wake” (*Like Joy in Season* 3), can diminish the individual just as the conventional “ship of state” can cut a swathe through political waters and drown out resistance, rendering the individual powerless, “we stand-to helpless” (3). Dorcey’s decision to explore the conventional mother/ daughter relationship in conjunction with her own unconventional sexuality connects with “her decision to live [work and write] in Ireland . . . a refusal to be banished, a refusal to see *Irish* in the limited terms of the Ancient Order of Hibernia or traditional Ireland” (O’Carroll and Collins 43).

This memory of the last time the mother was reliable, her true self, becomes fragmented as “a lifetime’s / cargo is jettisoned . . .” (3); the enjambment creates a haunting, tenuous and attenuated tone. The alliterative quality of “flagship . . . lifetime . . . flotsam . . . float” (3), asserts the physicality of language and the sinuous repetition of consonance echoes the tantalising glimpses of past experience in “ship . . . mast . . . course . . . silks . . . self . . . survives . . . somebody’s . . .” (3) ending in the ambiguously continuous stasis of “still.” The power of memory in the poetry exemplifies the multiplicity Dorcey referred to, in which the “historical specificity and the complex interplay of differing levels of this lived experience, including the act of remembrance/ reminiscence—as a mode whereby that experience may be re-interpreted—come together in the mythic constructs of the poetry” (Yorke, *Impertinent Voices* 4). The visual imagery of the metaphorical ship laden with memories in a place of “storm and shallows” echoes and thus challenges the English poetic inheritance of Tennyson and Masfield.

The traditional “stately ship” is undercut—the “colours” are obscured, the “cargo” is “jettisoned,” the “bulwark” is “frail” (3). The rhythm, reflecting the inevitable, inexorable movement of history and process of time, is different and less safe in Dorcey’s poem and appropriate to the meanings. Sounds and metaphors mutually influence each other; important, significant words are stressed; the rhythm is less secure as the colonial stranglehold on the Irish state, symbolised by the ships of Empire forging trade, is diminished. The less acknowledged, dual colonialism of women’s voices, particularly lesbian voices, is also challenged, through the employment of three lined enjambed verses, that when heard, offer less security of expectation—the reader or listener is not safely brought up to the end of a line or verse.

“The Rapture of Senses” also creates an edgy uncertainty, in its five-lined structure and employment of clichés, which grate on the ear and are then supplanted in the second part of the poem with simple, direct and more authentic domestic detail. The poem conveys the struggle to represent a universal and hackneyed theme from a fresh perspective; the idea of worn-out words and masculine linguistic structures hampering personal, individual expression. The poem illustrates the suggestion that “Ireland’s women poets register cross-border concern (“border” here referring to divisions of language, class . . . sexual orientation . . . formal style as well as territory) with a relationship of private to public realm that is conditioned by Irish cultures gendered unease about definitions of nation state” (Ryan 20). The challenging statement that “Love—/ is not only/ the love of the body—” (*Like Joy in Season, Like Sorrow* 49), is charged with resonance through the use of hyphens, creating space around the conventional terms and expanding, through enjambment, into the deliberately isolated “work.” The word ambiguously refers to both to labour in order to make the relationship “work,” flourishing in the face of prejudice and bigotry, and to toil in order to express this in the literary “work” of art; the composition of the poem.

This typically post-modern self-reflection is further undercut by the use of the present continuous tense, “Hoping . . . Speaking . . . Falling” (49) in the first part of the poem, “thinking . . . cooking . . . laughing . . . Weeping” (50) in the second, creating a continuous cascade of conflicting abstract and concrete, passive and active verbs. The undefined, yet intimate space is conveyed in the simplicity of: “wakeful in the/ small hours,/ quiet, while/the other sleeps” (50). Again the subtle ambiguity of Dorsey’s phrasing sets up an initially conventional, relatively bland image which opens up to a range of possibilities—the “other”: partner/ lover; opposite element of the psyche; alternative gender; optional lifestyle; which “sleeps” but might be roused, activated, accepted. Reading her poetry in postcolonial terms helps to redress the lack noted by Linda Connolly, “From the perspective of gender, the Irish postcolonial framework appears totalising and contextually insensitive” (150). Dorsey clearly contributes significantly to the claim that “women’s poetry currently leads Irish poetry in its role in prompting the people of this island towards recognition that accepting and celebrating difference is the truest basis of personal and group identity” (Ryan 18).

Dorsey’s lifetime has been concurrent with “the period of the existence of the Republic, [during which] women’s poetry island-wide has emerged from invisibility and near non-entity in 1949 to acquiring, in the late 1990s, the controversial status of most critically fashionable sub-division in Irish poetry . . . [this] began . . . around the late 1980s . . . when socio-sexual issues began to dominate politics openly in the 26 counties” (Ryan 18). These poems also illustrate tensions between life and art, the “attempt to make the outer image reflect in some true measure the inner reality of lesbian life . . . without being shoved into a literary cul-de-sac” (O’Carroll and Collins 41). Mary Dorsey’s special talent is to take the ordinary and examine its emotional potential; to

demonstrate the fundamental need to recognise and celebrate human anguish and ecstasy; to acknowledge Irish women poets' postcolonial presence in the political, sexual and literary contexts they inhabit. Her poems thus explore the question of identity, another essential aspect of a postcolonial response to the marginalisation of women's voices.

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